

# The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Buddleja Buzz Lilac



Hydrangea Red Baron



Mini Olives

## The mild temperatures have delayed reality in the garden

**A**T this time of the year, you'd really expect the garden to know winter is well on its way. The mild temperatures of the last few weeks seem to have delayed reality. In the garden the buddleja are still going strong, the one pictured is Buzz Lilac. These plants are really low maintenance and look great as well as being fabulous butterfly magnets. I shall leave mine now until the spring, when they will benefit from pruning which prevents them from becoming leggy and helps to maintain a nice compact plant. They flower on new growth, so pruning will also help to promote lots of new stems that will flower in the same year.

Pruning is best done once the hardest frosts are over, as the new growth begins to show. Firstly, remove any dead, diseased, damaged, or weak stems, before pruning all off the remaining stems back to form a low framework. In future years you can simply shorten the previous season's growth back to 2 pairs of buds from this permanent framework. A top tip I've picked up for pruning buddleja is to always use clean, sharp secateurs and make your cuts squarely, just above a healthy pair of buds.

Meanwhile, in the greenhouse, the succulents and others are doing well. The heater has not had to kick in too often as the temperature has not really dropped to danger levels for them as yet. It pays to check on them nonetheless and to open the greenhouse door on warmer days for the air to circulate.

The warmer weather has helped produce 3 fabulous stems of flowers on the yucca in the top corner of the garden. This *Yucca gloriosa*, also called Spanish dagger, is a medium-sized evergreen shrub, usually a single stem, topped by a cluster of spine-tipped, stiff, glaucous-green leaves growing to 60cm in length. The flower stems can grow to 2m in height, with nodding, bell-shaped cream flowers as you can see. *Yucca gloriosa* has been cultivated in the UK for nearly

500 years and was much favoured in Victorian seaside plantings as a tough, dependable, evergreen plant with striking architectural form. With age, the so-called Spanish Dagger will form a branched trunk with a few crowns of densely-rosetted, ferocious spine-tipped leaves, so planting it away from high traffic areas is paramount, mine are well out of reach of any passing visitors.

This year, I have had a few tiny olives appear on the trees in the garden. They are not suitable to eat as they have not really developed but they look good on the pair of standard shrubs behind the house. Olive trees are evergreen, meaning they won't lose their leaves in the winter. While they look most at home in sunny climes, they are from the Mediterranean after all, they can still thrive in slightly colder, rainier environments, like the UK.

I've got quite a few varieties of hydrangeas in the garden, the one pictured is red baron. This easy to grow plant produces rosy red flowers in mophead form, in abundance. The blooms of *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Red Baron' slowly fade to a deeper, more subtle shade of red as they mature during the season, extending this hardy shrub's interest through into autumn. Its compact growing habit means that it can also be grown in containers on the patio as well as being included in a shrub border. The plant prefers a sunny or semi shaded position, with shelter from cold, drying winds. Grow hydrangea plants in any rich fertile, moist soil. Improve the soil prior to planting by adding plenty of well-rotted manure or garden compost, ensuring that it is mixed in thoroughly and deeply. Alternatively, plant hydrangea macrophylla in patio containers in soil-based compost.

These well-behaved plants need very little maintenance, but an annual pruning will help to keep them looking good. Pruning hydrangeas helps to keep them at a manageable size and gives them a good shape, by stimulating the plant to produce new shoots, pruning also results in a better display of flowers. However



Checking the greenhouse

pruning your plants at the wrong time of year can drastically affect the number of flowers they produce, so it's important to understand when to prune hydrangeas. The best time to prune most hydrangeas is in late winter or spring, with the exception of climbing hydrangeas, which are pruned in summer after they have finished flowering. Different types of hydrangea require different pruning techniques.

It's very easy to identify the different types of hydrangea from their flowers, so if you aren't sure which hydrangea you have, simply wait for it to flower in summer and then prune it the following year, once you know which type it is. Leaving a hydrangea un-pruned for a year will not do it any harm.

Read more of Geoff's garden at [www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk](http://www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk)



Yucca Flowering